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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study examined the effects of fathers' perceptions of work stress on the father-child relationship. The sample of families was fairly homogenous: all two-parent families, primarily white and of European descent, with a target child who, at the beginning of the study, was in fourth grade. In a little less than half the families, the mothers were not employed outside the home. Children were interviewed in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, and their parents completed questionnaires in each of those years. Assessments of the parent-child relationship were based on data from both the father and the target child. Findings suggest that fathers' perceptions of chronic stress at work, over a 1-year period, had a negative impact on the father-child relationship. The effects were observed in terms of increases in parental withdrawal and more aversive father-child interactions. The data suggest that these findings were stronger among father-son dyads than among father-daughter dyads. Some variation from this pattern was found for the single-earner families. (HTH)

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SRCD, April 1999
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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Abstract

In a prospective longitudinal study children were interviewed in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades, and their parents completed questionnaires in each of those years. Assessments of the parent-child relationship were based on data from both the father and the target child. The results suggested that fathers' perceptions of chronic stress at work, over a one-year period, had a negative impact on the father-child relationship. The effects were observed in terms of increases in parental withdrawal and more aversive father-child interactions. The use of a fairly homogenous sample of families may account for the evidence suggesting *direct* effects of job stressors on parenting outcomes. However, even within a fairly homogenous sample, important group differences were found involving child sex and the mothers' employment status. These patterns in the data point to the different effects of chronic stress in different families. Overall, the use of a prospective longitudinal design and multiple informants should increase confidence in the reliability of this study's findings.

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The Longitudinal Association Between Perceived Job Characteristics and Fathers' Relationships with their Children

Rena L. Repetti[1]
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Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development
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There is now a substantial body of research suggesting that chronic job stressors, such as high demands and pressure, as well as persistent interpersonal problems at work, are transmitted to families (Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, & McHale, in press; Hughes, Galinsky, & Morris, 1992; MacDermid & Williams, 1997; Repetti, 1994). With respect to the parenting role, two types of outcomes are usually tested: a disruption of the parent-child relationship and a deterioration in some aspect of child adjustment. Interestingly, direct effects of parental job stressors on these two types of outcomes are often not found, and when they are observed, the effects are usually fairly weak (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, in press). Instead, subjective reports of internal distress in response to experiences in work and family roles create an indirect link between chronic stressors at work and parenting (increase aversiveness and increase withdrawal/ less involvement) and child outcomes. (See Figure 1.) Thus, chronic job stress is transmitted to families only when the employed parent reports feelings of role conflict or role overload. This pattern of findings suggests that there are important group differences in our samples. That is, depending on other circumstances in the family, a father's experience of chronic stressors at work may affect his parenting roles in different ways. Therefore, an important set of questions for researchers in this area to address are: under *what conditions* are *which job stressors* transferred to *which families*; *how* is stress transmitted, and *what different types of outcomes* are observed?

The study that I will present today attempts to contribute to that line of questioning by focusing on a sample of families which is fairly homogeneous, at least with respect to certain demographic characteristics. They are all two-parent families, with a target child who, at the beginning of the study, was in fourth grade. They are primarily white, of European descent. The parents are well-educated, most with professional occupations and high incomes. In short, the families share some important life circumstances, although there are also some differences among them. For example, in a little less than half of the families, the mothers were not employed outside of the home. I compare these single-earner families to the two-earner families in the sample to see if the mother's employment status influences how fathers' chronic job stress is transmitted to children.

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This is a prospective longitudinal study in which the children were interviewed at school in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades, and their parents completed questionnaires in each of those years. I will focus exclusively on longitudinal analyses of the data, testing one-year time lags (i.e. assessing change from fourth to fifth grade, and from fifth to sixth grade). The study includes assessments of the parent-child relationship based on data from both the father and the target child.

Measures

Chronic Job Stressors. As shown in Table 1, chronic stress at work was defined in two ways. First, social conditions at work were assessed by asking fathers' about their usual feelings during interactions with coworkers and supervisors. Fathers who described feeling attacked, pressured, tense and annoyed on a regular basis as a result of their social interactions were considered to work under conditions of chronic social stress. Second, fathers' workload was measured as a combination of the number of demands that are placed on them at work and the pace of work or time pressure under which the tasks much be completed. Fathers who reported that, on a typical day at work, they experience a high level of demands that must be completed under great time pressure were considered to work under conditions of chronic work overload. These are both subjective measures of job stressors. In tests of their association with the parent-child relationship, the effects of one variable are tested while controlling for the other.

Fathers' Descriptions of the Parent-Target Child Relationship. In an annual questionnaire, fathers described their relationship with the target child using five scales. (See Table 2.) There were three measures of self-reported paternal involvement. A high score on the withdrawal scale indicates that the father feels that he lacks sufficient interest and energy to be adequately involved and responsive to the child. There were two additional measures of positive paternal involvement. One assessed the fathers' perceptions of general positive qualities in the father-child relationship (such as expressions of affection and appreciation), and the other was the fathers' reports of their responsibility for child care and rearing tasks (such as helping with school work). Two scales assessed aversive parent-child interactions. One describes a child who is difficult to control (irritating, loud and noisy, misbehaves). The other is the father's report of his use of punishment, including physical punishment.[2]

Children's Descriptions of the Parent-child Relationship. In the fourth grade, children were randomly assigned to describe their relationship with *either* their mother *or* their father. They continued to describe the relationship with that target parent in each of the next two years. Therefore, there are smaller sample sizes for the analyses involving child reports of the father-child relationship. As shown in Table 3, children responded to a series of questions that formed five scales. Two scales focused on how the child viewed him- or herself within the context of the father-child relationship. The first of these is analogous to the father's report of difficult child behavior. High scores indicate that the

[2] The fathers' self-reported use of punishment and their descriptions of negative child behavior were higher when the target child was a son.

child described him- or herself as misbehaving, difficult to control, and loud and noisy when around his/her father. The second of these scales measures the child's perception of his place in his father's emotional life. The items on this scale were taken from the CRPBI Possessiveness and Child Centeredness subscales (Schaefer, 1965). High scores indicate that the child believes he or she is at the center of the father's life. The father is very involved, both in terms of time spent with the child and attention given to the child, and the father worries when the child is not near him. In short, the father makes the child feel "like the most important person in his life."

In addition, there were three measures of the child's perception of the father and his parenting behavior. These were scales assessing paternal warmth, paternal withdrawal, and paternal irritability and punitiveness. With one exception involving an interaction effect in one analysis, none of these three child-report measures of the father's parenting was associated with fathers' reports of chronic job stress in longitudinal analyses. I return to this point at the end of my talk.

Results

Analytic Strategy

The results presented here are based on longitudinal analyses that assess change in parent-child interactions over one year. In each multiple regression analysis, the outcome variable is a measure of the parent-child relationship (obtained in either the 5th or the 6th grade) and the main predictor is a single job stressor assessed one year earlier. Before testing that association, the analysis controlled for three variables: (1) child sex, (2) the prior year's score on the parent-child relationship variable, and (3) the other job stressor variable. Other analyses assessed the role of the mother's employment status, comparing dual-earner and sole-breadwinner families. Interactions between fathers' experiences of chronic stress at work and both the sex of the target child and the "family type" (i.e., two-earner versus single-earner families) were tested. In the cases of significant interactions, qualifications to the findings are reported.

Results for Chronic Social Stressors at Work

As shown in Table 4, fathers' descriptions of more social stressors at work were associated with two patterns of change in father-child interaction over time. First, the fathers described themselves as increasingly withdrawn on both emotional and behavioral levels. Their reports on the withdrawal scale indicated that they were more disengaged from the child's day-to-day life, and increasingly felt that they lacked the energy and motivation to be actively involved with the child. This finding was observed in the analyses of 4th → 5th grade data, and for sons (but not daughters) in the 5th → 6th grade analyses.[3] In addition, among sons (but not daughters), fathers' ratings of social stressors at work when their sons were in the 4th grade were associated one year later with decrements in their reports of positive father-child interactions and child care responsibilities.

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[3] There were also significant cross-sectional associations between fathers' reports of social stressors at work and their reports of parental withdrawal at all three time points, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade.

Second, in the 5th → 6th grade analyses, chronic social stressors at work also predicted both fathers' and children's descriptions of increasing amounts of negative, acting out child behavior. Fathers described their sons (but not their daughters) as acting out more when around them. The children also described themselves as increasingly difficult to control around their fathers, misbehaving more, needing more reminding, and being loud and noisy. These findings were observed in the regressions testing 5th → 6th grade associations, but the association was not significant in the 4th → 5th grade analyses. It was also found in the two-year time lag, 4th → 6th grade.

Although not shown in Table 4, fathers' reports of chronic social stressors at work did *not* predict *children's* reports of increased paternal withdrawal which, as mentioned above, was assessed in this study. The children only described increases in their *own* negative, aversive behaviors in the year following their fathers' report of distressing interactions with coworkers and supervisors.

Results for Work Overload

Fathers' descriptions of overloads at work (high demands combined with time pressure) were also associated with two patterns of change in father-child interaction. As shown in Table 5, fathers with high pressure, demanding jobs tended to describe more aversive father-child interactions over time. They reported greater use of punishment with their children in the analyses of both 4th → 5th grade and 5th → 6th grade data.[4] In a marginally significant finding, these fathers also experienced their children as increasingly difficult to control. This was observed in tests of 5th → 6th grade associations, but the association was not significant in the 4th → 5th grade analyses. Note that the children of fathers with high-pressure jobs did not describe increasingly aversive father-child interactions.[5]

There were several interesting interactions between family type (two-earner versus single-earner) and chronic work overload. (See Table 6.) Follow-up analyses to the significant interactions showed that fathers in single-earner families who described experiencing high demands and pressure at work, reported a *decrease* in their children's negative, acting-out behavior from 4th → 5th grade. In the 5th → 6th grade period, the children also described themselves as *less* difficult when their fathers had reported chronic overload at work the year before. These children also reported a decrease in their centrality in their father's emotional life, and described their fathers as increasingly withdrawn.[6]

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[4] There were also significant cross-sectional associations at all three time points, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade, although the 5th grade result was only found for fathers who described their use of punishment with daughters.

[5] However, among 6th grade boys, there was a significant positive cross-sectional association between fathers' ratings of work overload and their sons' self-descriptions on the Difficult Child scale.

[6] Note that, although the interactions between family type and chronic overload at work were statistically significant, the follow-up analyses for the two groups of families, single-earner and two-earner, did not always produce significant associations between work overload and child ratings of the parent-child

Thus, these sole-breadwinner fathers, who were overloaded with demands and pressures at work, experienced their children as less annoying and difficult, and their children also reported decreases in their negative behavior over one year. In addition, the children saw their fathers as less emotionally connected to them and as more withdrawn. I'd like to suggest that this pattern of findings, which was specific to the single-earner families, may reflect a kind of "protected withdrawal." Perhaps in these homes, the non-employed mothers absorb more and more of the difficult aspects of child rearing as their husbands' jobs become increasingly demanding and stressful. That is, perhaps they act as a buffer, especially when the children are irritable or demanding. The children, in turn, described their fathers as increasingly withdrawn and saw themselves as moving more and more to the periphery of their fathers' lives.

These fathers did not describe themselves as less engaged in their children's day-to-day lives, nor as less responsible for child-rearing. They just experience their children as becoming more well behaved and easier to raise! There was no evidence for this type of protected withdrawal when the single-earner fathers had reported chronic social problems at work. It was only found for the single-earner fathers who were in high demand/high pressure jobs.

Two out of five of the child-report scales did not relate to the fathers' job stressors in any of the longitudinal analyses. For the most part, the data indicated that fathers' reports of chronic job stress are not so much associated with changes in how the child views the father, as much as they are associated with how the child comes to view him- or herself in relation to the father. Children's annual descriptions of parental warmth and of negative and controlling parenting were not linked to fathers' descriptions of their jobs. With one exception the same was also true of children's reports of parental withdrawal. However, the children's descriptions of their own acting-out behavior and the centrality of their place in their fathers' lives did change as a function of the fathers' descriptions of chronic stressors at work in the previous year.

Summary and Discussion

As shown in Table 7, when I put all of the significant results together they show that chronic social stressors at work were associated one year later both with fathers' increased emotional and behavioral withdrawal from their children, as well as with more aversive father-child interactions (especially difficult child behavior). The data suggested that these findings were stronger among father-son dyads than among father-daughter dyads.

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relationship. Nonetheless, the direction of the results clearly showed that the significant interactions were due to stronger associations between overload and the two parenting outcomes in the single-earner families. There was also a significant cross-sectional association among 5th grade children in the single-earner families only, between fathers' reports of chronic overload at work and child reports of increased paternal withdrawal.

Chronic work overload was also associated with increasingly aversive father-child interactions. Among fathers in single-earner families, work overload was also linked to greater distance between father and child, and to improved child behavior with father. This pattern is consistent with findings from daily-report studies, including the results that I obtained using daily-report data from a subsample of the fathers in this study. In this sample of mostly white, well-educated, professional fathers, work overload and negative social interactions at work were followed, later the same day, by short-term increases in paternal withdrawal (Repetti, 1997). This was found using both the fathers' daily self-reported behaviors and their children's daily descriptions of parent-child interactions. Instances of social withdrawal, repeated on daily basis, may lead to child acting-out and increasingly irritable and punitive parenting (Repetti & Wood, 1997). This is largely what was observed in this study, with the exception of fathers with non-employed wives. In these traditional (i.e. single-earner) families with highly educated parents, the long-term effects of repeated instances of parental withdrawal may not be more aversive parent-child interactions (at least not in the preadolescent years), just more distance in the father-child relationship, particularly with respect to the child's perceptions of the relationship.

Overall, the results from this study suggest that perceived chronic stress at work can have a decidedly negative impact on the father-child relationship. The effects are observed in terms of parental withdrawal and more aversive father-child interactions. The use of a fairly homogenous sample of families may account for the evidence suggesting *direct* effects of perceived job stressors on parenting outcomes. However, even within a fairly homogenous sample, important group differences were found involving child sex and the mothers' employment status. These patterns in the data point to the different effects of chronic stress in different families. Overall, the use of a prospective longitudinal design and multiple informants should increase confidence in the reliability of this study's findings.

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Figure 1
Work → Family Stress Transmission

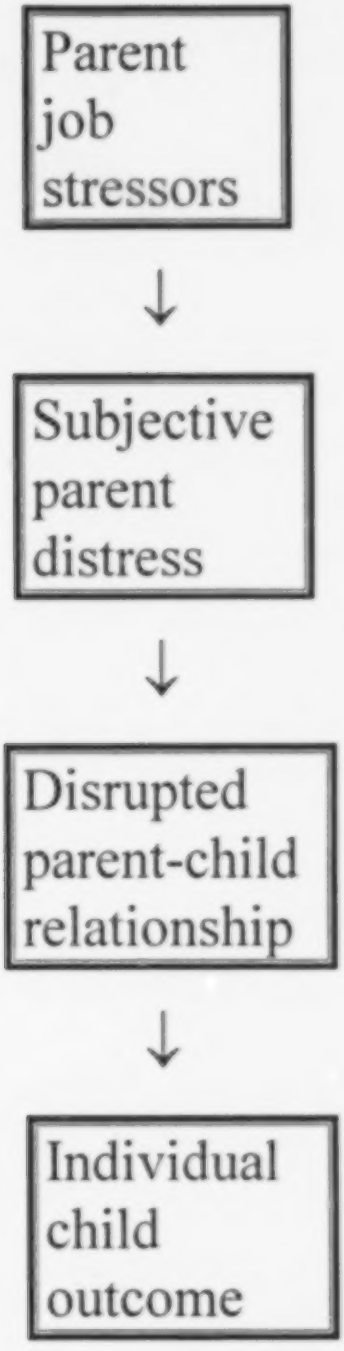

Table 1
Chronic Job Stressors

Chronic Social Stressors (14 ratings)

During interactions with coworkers (supervisors) I feel... (e.g., tense, resentful, attacked, annoyed, etc.)

Chronic Work Overload (5 items)

e.g., usually very busy, too many demands on my time, often feel like I barely have a chance to breathe

Table 2
Parent-Child Relationship
Fathers' Ratings

Paternal Involvement

Paternal Withdrawal (7 items)
e.g., too tired to interact much; ignore, do not pay attention to, or do not talk to my child

Positive Father-Child Relationship (18 items)
e.g., hug, say nice things, child is helpful, child expresses appreciation

Fathers' Parenting Responsibilities (10 items)
e.g., help get child ready for bed, help with school work, stay home with sick child

Aversiveness

Difficult Child (8 items)
e.g., loud & noisy; gives me a hard time; needs reminding, misbehaves

Paternal Use of Punishment (8 items)
e.g., take things away; send to room; yell, holler, scream; spank, slap, or hit

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Table 3
Parent-Child Relationship: Children's Ratings

Child's view of self in the father-child relationship

Difficult Child (7 items)
e.g., misbehave; need reminding; loud & noisy; hyperactive

Place in Father's Life (8 items)
e.g., center of his attention; most important person in his life; worries about me when I'm away

Father's Parenting Style

Father's Withdrawal (7 items)
Father's Warmth (23 items)
Father's Irritability, Control & Punitiveness (11 items)

Table 4
Chronic Social Stressors at Work Predicting Change in the Father-Child Relationship

	$4^{th} \rightarrow 5^{th}$	$5^{th} \rightarrow 6^{th}$
Fathers' Ratings		
Withdrawal	+.18*	+.19^{t} (sons)
Positive Relationship	-.15^{t} (sons)	ns
Parenting Responsibilities	-.24** (sons)	ns
Difficult Child	ns	+.23* (sons)
Use of Punishment	ns	ns
Child's Ratings		
Difficult Child	ns	+.38*
Place in Father's Life	ns	ns

$^{t}p \leq .10$ $^{*}p \leq .05$ $^{**}p \leq .01$

Table 5
Chronic Work Overload Predicting Change in the Father-Child Relationship

	4th → 5th	5th → 6th
Fathers' Ratings		
Use of Punishment	+.11*	+.10*
Difficult Child	ns	+.11[t]
Withdrawal	ns	ns
Positive Relationship	ns	ns
Parenting Responsibilities	ns	ns
Child's Ratings		
Difficult Child	ns	ns
Place in Father's Life	ns	ns

[t] $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$

Table 6

Follow-Up Analyses to Significant Interactions Between Work Overload and Maternal Employment Status
Results for Single-Earner Families

	4th → 5th	5th → 6th
Fathers' Ratings		
Difficult Child	-.26*	--
Child's Ratings		
Difficult Child	--	-.21ns
Place in Father's Life	--	-.35**
Withdrawal	--	.21ns

Note In each case, Betas for fathers in two-earner families were non-significant and near zero ($B \leq .10$).

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$

Table 7

Summary of Findings

Chronic Social Stressors at Work

- Fathers' increased withdrawal
- Increasingly aversive father-child interactions (particularly difficult child behavior)

Chronic Work Overload

- Increasingly aversive father-child interactions
- Among fathers in single-earner families, greater distance between father and child and improvements in child behavior